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ISLAM, FACING ITS HISTORY

BY HELA OUARDI

An elementary rule of caution is that if you want to overtake while driving, you must look in the rearview mirror. The same is true in the course of history: when a nation wants to overtake, surpass itself by bringing about a revolution, it must look in the rearview mirror – that is, at its history – otherwise it risks being hit head-on by an object approaching at high speed, that it did not see coming.

Because history is known to be merciless! If we neglect it, if we suppress it, if we ignore it, it can take a violent revenge on us. It is able to unleash the monsters of the past in the midst of us: they rage, they terrorise us, and eventually they take us hostage.

All this dawned on me on a day that I remember very well. It was September 14, 2012, a Friday afternoon: a group of ferocious individuals attacked the US embassy in Tunis and wanted to set it on fire, because of a video on YouTube with some excerpts from an American film that was considered offensive to Muhammad.¹ I was flabbergasted! Of course, it was not the first time that religious violence manifested itself, it was not the first time that faith took the terrifying face of crime. But it was the first time that I saw this violence directly – not on a television screen. I was amazed by the live spectacle. I did not understand it! How can people kill – and die themselves – to avenge Muhammad's derided honour? And who is that man anyway? What do I know about him and about Islam? Not much! Not to say nothing at all!

And suddenly the thick black smoke I saw rising above the American embassy seemed like the materialisation of my ignorance about our own history, about the history of a religion which has always been part of my life, but which is becoming alien to me. It's like living together with someone and one day discovering that your partner is living a double life and you actually didn't know him or her. That day I realised that the peaceful homely Islam, the Islam that lives through festivals and celebrations, the Islam that for me had the pious and serene face of my grandmother... well, that that Islam was mutating, transforming into a weapon aimed at us by fanatics and other madmen, into a tool for political propaganda at the service of adventurers who want to impose a religious dictatorship.

In essence, the incomprehension that seizes us with each of the terrible crimes that regularly startle us (since September 11, 2001, up to the recent attacks in the fall of 2020) is the fruit of our ignorance of the history of Islam, a religion of which the public only summarily knows the rituals and a few dogmas, but not its historical genesis.

So I decided to understand and to stop being the passive and indignant observer of a morbid spectacle. I decided to do like these terrorists, not launching my attack on an embassy, but on this fortress that is the history of Islam. I was convinced that knowing the past could give me the keys to understanding the present. Because exploring history means thinking about the topicality of the past, which – through past events that, however, continue to resonate – still addresses itself to

¹ Nakoula Basseley Nakoula's short *Innocence of Muslims* (2012) was screened only once in an American theatre – for only a dozen spectators.

us today. My research, reading and rewriting does not arise from an archaeological detachment. My books are 'children of the century' in that they are the fruit of a historical concern in face of the lightning-fast spread of a religious violence that regularly baffles and disgusts us.

In short, I kind of did what the Salafists do: I appropriated the past and placed it straight into the present, except that I didn't do it to idolise it, but to question it. A fundamentalist looks at the past through the rose-coloured glasses of legend; I myself look at it with a microscope. Because for me, history should not be an object of worship, but of knowledge.

For more than eight years now, I am interested in discovering that historical genesis. And so I started reading the oldest texts of the Muslim tradition, taking an interest in the history of the key figures of early Islam: the prophet Muhammad and his first four successors.² This research led to some books published between 2016 and 2019 by publisher Albin Michel in Paris: *Les Derniers Jours de Muhammad* [The Last Days of Muhammad] and *Les Califes maudits* [The Cursed Caliphs], a series of historical accounts dedicated to the first four caliphs of Islam. The first two parts of this series, *La Déchirure* [The Rift] and *A L'Ombre des sabres* [In the Shadow of the Swords], were published in 2019. The third part, which will be released in early 2021, is called *Meurtre à la mosquée* [Murder in the Mosque] and concerns an investigation into the intriguing murder of Omar ibn al-Khattab, the second caliph in the history of Islam.

In those books I concentrate, down to the smallest detail, on the most important period in the history of Islam, namely the initial period. The latter lays the foundation for what follows, but we don't really know much about it. Even to Muslims it is quite obscure. One doesn't talk about it and when it is talked about, it's always to sacralise it and to portray it as a glorious golden age in which the protagonists, the founders of Islam (Muhammad, his companions and members of his family) are presented as heroes, demigods whose exemplary course of life is to be imitated (the *al-salaf al-salih* or 'righteous predecessors'). However, it suffices to glance through the books of Muslim tradition to realise very quickly that the historical origin of Islam is far from 'a long silent river', a golden age in which everyone is beautiful and friendly. On the contrary,

from Muhammad's emigration to Medina in 622 to the horrific civil war of 656-661, called the Great Discord (*al-Fitna al-Kubra*), which irreversibly divided Muslims into Sunnites and Shiites, the history of the early years of Islam were one unbroken series of raids, fraternal wars, exterminations and gruesome political murders. We can clearly observe this phenomenon in the light of two key moments, full of mystery and violence: the death of Muhammad and his succession.

It is a decisive and symbolic period, coinciding with the last weeks leading up to the death of Muhammad, and in which the conflicts sprung up that have been ravaging the Muslim world – and the world *tout court* – to this day. Thanks to this critical period, we get to know the context in which a political institution emerged that is once again in the spotlight today: the caliphate. Understanding this founding period allowed me to question the myth surrounding the early years of Islam.

What happened in Medina in the summer of 632? Muhammad died on June 8, Abu Bakr became caliph two or three days later, and Fatima, the daughter of Muhammad, died a few weeks after her father. Three decisive events in the history of Islam about which we know very little, because no one likes to talk about them. And for good reason! The numerous details abundant in Muslim Tradition seriously undermine the idyllic image Muslims have of the companions and the family of Muhammad – an image based on selective memory. During this decisive period, however, a real tragedy took place: Muhammad, sad and left to himself, dies in gloomy circumstances; we will never know if he died of illness or if he was poisoned. Abu Bakr, his stepfather and friend, is proclaimed caliph at the end of a violent riot – almost a coup.³ Fatima, Muhammad's daughter, is attacked and mistreated by her father's companions, and is disinherited – before she mysteriously dies. In what follows, we will broadly reconstruct this tragedy in three acts, the replies of which still resonate to this day.

Let's start with the main plot, the matrix from which the other twists and turns of the drama will sprout: the death of Muhammad, to which I dedicated my first book *Les Derniers Jours de Muhammad* [The Last Days of Muhammad].

With the story I propose in my book I have tried to give a logical sequence of events through their chronological course.

² Each time a reference is made in this text to 'Tradition', with capital letter, this refers to the 'message' about the deeds or sayings of Muhammad that are not mentioned in the Koran, or more generally, to the written Islamic sources (translator's note).

³ Abu Bakr is the father of Aisha, Muhammad's favourite wife according to Sunni Tradition. The Shiites, on the other hand, portray this influential woman as an almost evil character.

At the same time I wanted to place the last months of Muhammad's life in a historical, measurable, 'narratable' time, which is deliberately positioned at the opposite of the timelessness of legend. Chronologically, my account takes place between the end of September 631, the last military expedition led by Muhammad, and June 10, 632, the estimated date of Muhammad's burial, who died two days earlier. The story is therefore spread over ten months. Within that time frame, starting from a confrontation between Sunni and Shia sources, I describe the end of a regime. The atmosphere is critical, and in more ways than one. Muhammad's authority is seriously affected by the failed battles against Byzantium. Later, a few weeks after his last military Expedition of Tabuk, he falls seriously ill. Everyone understands that the end is approaching. Muhammad, faced with the ambition of his relatives (companions and members of his family), is aware that his succession is going to be a painful affair: he tries to leave a will but is prevented from doing so. On Monday, June 8, 632, the 13th day of the first *Rabi* of the year XI of the Hegira, he breathes his last – without expressing his last wishes.

The news of Muhammad's death engulfs Medina like a cataclysm: upheaval is everywhere. Readers from an Islamic background will recall the words of Muhammad announcing to his Followers that the apocalypse is imminent. They cry, 'How can he die, he who is our Witness, our Mediator, and our Advocate with God? No, by God! He is not dead, but he is ascended and in ecstatic delight, like Jesus.' Despite Arabic custom and the instructions of Muhammad himself, who recommended a quick burial of the dead, the burial does not take place immediately. His corpse begins to decompose. His funeral is finally held on Wednesday evening. But Muhammad formally banned night funerals. Ultimately, is this a secret funeral?

This is not the only question that still remains unanswered – when one examines the final episode in the life of the prophet of Islam accurately. The last months of his life and the circumstances of his death and burial are shrouded in mystery.

First, there is the strange Expedition of Tabuk. The battle against the Byzantines did not take place: for unknown reasons, Muhammad ordered the withdrawal of his troops, while one rather thought that he would occupy the city. On the way back, he is the victim of a mysterious assassination attempt about which the Tradition says next to nothing: it claims that Muhammad knew the identities of the conspirators but did

not punish them. And the will the Prophet would dictate on Thursday, which was prevented by his companions, and caused a quarrel at his deathbed: what could it have contained? Tradition remains deafeningly silent on these questions.

Another mystery, amplified still by a multitude of conflicting versions, concerns the real cause of Muhammad's death. This mystery is all the more persistent because in the same work of Tradition (such as Ibn Hisham's *Sira* or Al-Bukhari's *Sahih*) we find two different versions. In one version, he dies from being poisoned by the Jewess Zaynab Bint al-Harith, whose father, husband, and uncle were killed during the capture of Khaybar. The other version claims he died of pleurisy. The strangest thing is that those two versions are based on one single source: Aisha, the wife of Muhammad!

At the beginning of his illness, Muhammad very quickly understands that the ailment he is suffering from is due to a poisoning that strangely enough took place three years earlier, namely in the year VII of the Hegira (that is to say, the period of his exile, from the moment that he fled Mecca). Zaynab is said to have served him poisoned roast, to revenge the death of her relatives. It is difficult to imagine that poison will work in the body for three years. The hypothesis of Zaynab's poisoning has greatly baffled the authors of the Tradition, not because it is medically unlikely, but because acknowledging that Muhammad died from the poisoned meal Zaynab served him means that the latter was right. Didn't she say to Muhammad, 'I wanted to test you: if you are a prophet you will be saved and if you are king we will get rid of you.' This is very embarrassing! The authors of the Tradition had to find another cause. And here we see the hypothesis of death by pleurisy (*dhat al-janab*) taking form. But Muhammad himself denies that: according to him, pleurisy is a satanic disease to which prophets are immune. This belief explains his refusal to take a drug – the Indian 'costus' plant. The members of his family administer it to him anyway, without his knowledge, on Sunday, on the eve of his death. Muhammad is so angry that he orders everyone to take the same medicine as punishment, 'under his eyes'. Why would he ask such a thing if he has no doubts whatsoever about the nature of the potion that is presented to him?

The first hours after Muhammad's death are also very enigmatic. Why was he buried so late? Why didn't Abu Bakr and Omar, his first two successors (presented as his best friends), attend his funeral?

It is impossible for me to enumerate all the questions raised by the dark circumstances surrounding Muhammad's death. At the same time, a close examination of the last months of his life reveals a number of ideas that seem far less questionable.

The first thing to note is that Muhammad's authority is significantly weakened towards the end of his life. There is the trism of the fall of a powerful sovereign in the wake of military defeat. The catastrophic defeat of the Muslims against the Byzantines at Mu'tah in 629, as well as the harrowing ordeal of the Tabuk campaign in 631, will add to Muhammad's waning authority. He is now the object of criticism for his overly reckless initiatives, even within his community. This marks the beginning of a deep internal political crisis.

One will go as far as to try to kill him on the way back from the Tabuk expedition. The sources from Tradition confirm that Muhammad knows the names of the conspirators, but refrains from punishing them. Strangely enough, the second attack on the way back from Mecca, after the farewell pilgrimage, also goes unpunished. This is a surprising attitude for a man who did not shy away from cutting off heads because of a few satirical poems. But times have visibly changed for Muhammad, who is now in a very delicate situation – which keeps him from hitting back.

In truth, there are cracks in Muhammad's authority just about everywhere. His closest companions openly disobey him, even mistreat him, going so far as to confiscate his will and prevent him from dictating it. For it is clear that what he wants to dictate does not benefit the affairs of his companions at all, especially Omar, who says that Muhammad is talking gibberish.

At the end of his life, Muhammad finds himself in the midst of a whirlwind of greed, he is a man on his own, faced with the insatiable ambitions of his wives and companions. The fact that Muhammad moves in with his wife Aisha during his last illness, undoubtedly has a decisive impact. Together with her accomplice Hafsa, Aisha weaves a web around her husband's bed: she takes advantage of his physical weakness to put Fatima and Ali, whom she hates, aside. Aisha and Hafsa have largely paved the way for their respective fathers, Abu Bakr and Omar.⁴

⁴ Let's remind us that the institution of the caliphate is strongly associated with the family ties between Muhammad and his companions. For example, the first four orthodox caliphs were the stepfathers and sons-in-law of Muhammad. Political authority in Islam is above all (always?) a family matter.

Muhammad's death is often associated with the problem of succession and with the rivalry between members of his family and his companions. However, the political crisis goes well beyond the borders of Muhammad's 'court' and affects the entire Arab Empire. In his evening of life, Muhammad is faced with a great dissident movement, led by the so-called 'false prophets'. The latter are beginning to gather a considerable number of followers, especially in Yamama province and in Yemen.

Unlike the companions, who only deal with the issues of political succession and financial legacy, the 'false prophets' are leading a movement that radically protests against Muhammad's authority. The movement is spreading like wildfire across Arabia. The 'false prophets' Musaylima, Talha, Aswad and the prophetess Sajah become a serious threat to Muhammad, who has nightmares about them. Musaylima and Aswad even go so far as to send him threatening letters.

The religious-political threat to Islam posed by the 'false prophets' is so serious that the first action of the first caliph, Abu Bakr, is to wage brutal wars against them, the so-called *hurub al-ridda* or Wars of Apostasy.⁵ It is a decisive episode in which the first 'well-run' caliphate is inaugurated with a massacre. My latest book, *A L'Ombre des sabres* is devoted to this horrific episode. Here we notice the clear manifestation of a fundamental violence, in which political opposition and religious denial are inextricably intertwined. The consequences of this original superposition of politics and religion can be felt in the Muslim world to this day.

One of the most disturbing episodes of this transition period – between the end of 'the prophecy' and the beginning of the caliphate – is the abandonment of Muhammad's corpse, which will not be buried until two to four days after his death, when it already begins to show signs of decay. It is a filthy and embarrassing image that probably to this day remains a spectre in the collective unconscious of Muslims. It would, as with resurfacing repressed guilt, explain the obsession with blasphemy among modern Muslims.

⁵ The Ridda Wars or Wars of Apostasy: Arabs converted en masse to Islam for selfish motives, namely to escape the *jizya*, the tax imposed on non-Muslims. After Muhammad's death, many converts feel freed from their financial obligations, invoking the personal nature of their loyalty to Muhammad. They claim to be Muslim but refuse to send the *zakat* taxes (which were imposed on Muslims) to Medina. The reaction of the new caliph, Abu Bakr, will not be long in coming: since to him they are apostates, he declares merciless war on them. But let the religious motive that plays a role in these brutal wars not obscure the economic motives. The aim was not so much to lead the Arabs to Islam, but to bring taxes to the caliph in Medina.

But how do we explain that Muhammad's corpse was left behind? I think there are two reasons, one religious and one political.

On the one hand, according to his followers Muhammad came to earth to herald the end of the world and to witness man during the – soon to be announced – final judgment. Several verses from the Koran⁶ and numerous hadiths that evoke the coming of that last judgment – which is also called 'the Hour' in Islam – make it tangible.⁷ The goal of the Mu'tah and Tabuk expeditions against Byzantium was the conquest of Jerusalem from an eschatological perspective. If Muhammad is seen as the Prophet of the end times, it also makes sense that he would lead his converts to Jerusalem, where they would have to wait for the final judgment. When he subsequently dies, the wind of panic that blows over Medina can be explained by the fear of the approaching apocalypse. His fellow believers, led by Omar ibn al-Khattab, believe he will rise after three days, like Jesus. Some fearful Muslims believe that Muhammad's death will coincide with the end of the world. Others deny his death, thinking that he should not die because he is expected to be their witness on the day of judgment.

Under these circumstances, it is understandable that Muhammad did not consider appointing a successor, which would be pointless, since, as the Koran says, 'The Hour is approaching' (first verse of sura 'The Moon'). One might even linger on that thought and wonder why Muhammad would establish a new religion, since he has come to herald the end of time?

The idea of the delay that occurs because the end of the world is in sight sparked a total historical revision that already started a century after Muhammad's death. Using a nice oxymoron, French writer and orientalist Paul Casanova called this general revision a 'pious fraud'⁸. We still feel the consequences of this 'pious fraud', now that, with the violent return of the motif of the holy war, we smell the stench of a distant conviction that fourteen centuries of theological 'acrobatics' could restrain – but never completely destroy.

6 As we can read in verse 187 of sura 7, or in verses 42-46 of sura 79, and the first verses of sura 16, 21 and 54.

7 Paul Casanova's *Mohammad and the End of the World. A Critical Study on Primitive Islam*, is essential reading on this theme (online translation by David Reid Ross). Available here: https://www.academia.edu/20363722/Mohammed_and_the_End_of_the_World. The original version includes so-called 'Complementary Notes' and contains 244, not 82 pages: *Mohammed et la fin du monde. Etude critique sur l'Islam primitif*, 2 vol., Paris, Librairie Paul Geuthner, 1911-1913. Online available here: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k851849c.r=Mohammed%20et%20la%20fin%20du%20monde.%20Etude%20critique%20sur%20l%27Islam%20primitif?rk=21459;2>

8 Idem, p. 8 (in both the French and English version).

Muhammad came to herald the end of the world, and some Muslims appropriate the original message of their prophet, actualising the original eschatological imagination – which within Islam has undoubtedly formed the foundation of the religious faith.⁹

With the death of Muhammad, we are face to face with the founding moment of a religion that, now without its prophet, must pass the test of its own survival. Without the authority of the deceased Master, Islam must reinvent itself – or perhaps even invent itself *tout court*. Here we see the decisive role of the first two caliphs, Abu Bakr and Omar. By creating the caliphate, which would last for several centuries, they gave a future to what was originally an end-time doctrine, and so what thus should have been buried together with Muhammad.

Here we also see that Muhammad's late burial is grounded in a political manoeuvre carried out by Abu Bakr and Omar to seize power. Curiously, the two future caliphs are absent from their friend Muhammad's funeral. And effectively, a few hours after his death, Abu Bakr and Omar are warned: 'Hurry up, before the situation gets out of hand.' The two sheikhs then run to the *saqifa* (arbour) of the Banu Sa'ida clan, where the Ansar,¹⁰ the aristocracy of the Quraish,¹¹ has gathered to choose the leader of the Khazraj Sa'd Ibn Ubada.¹² This is where the second act of the tragedy takes place, namely the election/coup d'état of Abu Bakr and Omar.

To this crucial episode, I devoted the first volume of the series *Les Califes maudits*, entitled *La Déchirure*. This book, that deals with the inauguration of Abu Bakr, the first caliph in the history of Islam, describes the first weeks of this decisive rule. It begins with the reconstruction of the Banu Sa'ida clan's very famous gathering at the *saqifa*. In the hours following Muhammad's death, his companions (Ansar and emigrants) find themselves at a proper conclave, which must appoint a leader. A consensus proves impossible and the meeting degenerates into a fist fight. The meeting in the *saqifa*, a truly

9 Take, for example, the book *da'wa al-muqawama al-islamiyya al-'alamiyya* [Call for Worldwide Islamic Resistance] by Omar Abdelhakim, aka Abu Mus'ab al-Suri (according to French political scientist Gilles Kepel the manifesto of the third jihadist wave). It ends with a chapter entitled 'Misk al-khitam' [To End in Style], in which we find an anthology of eschatological hadiths. For Daesh, the drama of the end of history must inevitably take place on a singular stage, namely the place where Muhammad wanted to lead his followers: Syria (*Blad al-Sham*, being today's Syria plus Lebanon and Jordan).

10 The Ansar (literally the assistants or helpers) are the two tribes, namely the Aws and the Khazraj, who offered Muhammad asylum when he emigrated to their city of Yathrib in 622 – which will henceforth be called Medina.

11 The Quraish is Muhammad's original tribe. The higher castes of this influential tribe refuse the appointment of Abu Bakr since he belongs to a minor clan of the tribe.

12 Sa'd Ibn Ubada will later be the first political opponent in the history of Islam: he will be murdered by the jinns, or so we are told...

primitive scene, has inscribed the internal divisions and the painful power transfer into Islam's genetic programme. Abu Bakr and his supporters find themselves forced to use violence. With the help of militias deployed in the streets of Medina, they organise a real coup, while Muhammad's funeral is taking place.

But this final act of violence, which takes place in the *saqifa* and then in the mosque (where one swiftly swears allegiance to the first caliph), will not solve the problem of succession. The first caliph, Abu Bakr, soon faces widespread opposition from a part of the Ansar and – above all – the family of Muhammad, whose protest is crystallising around Fatima, Muhammad's daughter.

Fatima is right at the centre of the tragedy's third act. She is also the central character in the series that I dedicate to the 'cursed caliphs'. Because it is she who pronounces the curse on Abu Bakr and all her father's companions, whom she considers accomplices of the injustice she suffered. Double injustice, indeed: political injustice, because Muhammad's family is being taken from power; and financial injustice, for the first caliph (encouraged by Omar) decides to confiscate the property left behind by Muhammad and to disinherit Fatima. She does not capitulate but fights to assert her rights. Muhammad's entire family stands behind her.

To quell this terrible uprising, Abu Bakr and his henchmen deploy violent methods against Fatima: Omar comes by and threatens to set her house on fire. Like Antigone, she bravely resists, starting an open conflict with her father's successor. In a scene worthy of a Greek tragedy, Fatima walks to the mosque and gives a poignant speech in which she openly curses 'the usurper' Abu Bakr and all of her father's companions, who are complicit in the injustice she suffered.^{13, 14} She calls all of them to appear before the tribunal of God and announces that they will all bear the caliphate as a burden and punishment.

Immediately after that dire prediction, the first caliph suddenly loses his eldest son. He is convinced that the curse is beginning to materialise and will try to step down several times – in vain! He tries to reconcile with Fatima, but she will even

refuse to talk to him. Soon after she dies in dark circumstances, just like her father. Was she murdered by the leaders of the new regime? Everything leads in that direction. Abu Bakr is consumed with remorse. On his death bed, he confides to his daughter Aisha: 'I should never have attacked Fatima's house!' Is this a veiled admission that this aggression was the indirect cause of Muhammad's daughter's death?¹⁵

This is a clear deconstruction of the mythical vision of a 'golden age' of Islam and its 'pious ancestors', to which the Salafists refer today. What we can clearly observe is that violence in Islam is not a short-term but a structural phenomenon. What shocked me was that Muhammad himself was probably a victim of this violence. The first caliphate was founded after a true coup d'état and imposed itself with the force of the sword: Muhammad's successor fought particularly bloody wars indeed, against anyone who challenged his authority. These wars, nicknamed the Ridda Wars or Wars of Apostasy, were incredibly brutal. The chief 'architect' of these barbaric massacres was generalissimo Khalid ibn al-Walid, who is represented by the Islamic apologetic tradition as a heroic warrior. But when we look at the account of the battles and raids he led in the name of the first caliph, we realise that he is but a bloodthirsty criminal whose gruesome atrocities made Muhammad's companions shudder with horror. Notably Omar ibn al-Khattab, who vigorously denounced and condemned the cruel acts of the man whom Tradition pompously nicknamed 'the drawn sword of Allah'. (Some elementary schools actually bear his name today!)

Ultimately, by establishing the so-called Islamic State, Daesh is simply repeating the tragic origins of the first caliphate, which was founded at the cost of a massacre. We suddenly understand why Ibrahim Awad, the self-proclaimed Caliph of IS, chose Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi al-Quraychi as his pseudonym, which refers to the name of the first Caliph and to Muhammad's original tribe. Do Muslims for example know that the gruesome auto-da-fé of the Jordanian pilot executed by Daesh in 2015 is a literal repetition of the inaugural gesture of Islam's first caliph, who, the day after he came to power, commanded his opponents to be burned alive?

In fact, the discovery of this fundamental violence in the history of Islam elicits two kinds of reactions among Muslims. On the one hand, there is the majority of those who live in

¹³ In Sunni and Shia Tradition Fatima's speech is called *al-khutba al-fadakiyya* [The Sermon of Fadak]. The title is a reference to the oasis of Fadak, which Fatima claims as a possession bequeathed to her by her father, and taken from her by the first caliph.

¹⁴ The curse of Fatima is somewhat reminiscent of the curse that Jacques de Molay hurls from the stake to Philippe Le Bel's face, in Maurice Druon's *The Accursed Kings* (London, HarperCollins, 2013-2014 [1955-1977]).

¹⁵ Shia sources claim that Fatima (pregnant at the time) was violently beaten by Omar on the day of the attack on her home. She is said to have miscarried, which resulted in a severe bleeding causing her death.

denial. They say, 'That's not Islam, that's not us!' – a sterile reaction that in short amounts to sweeping the crimes under the carpet. And when you show them the verses of the Koran that call for strife and murder, they tell you, just like Molière's famous character: 'Hide this verse which I cannot behold!' On the other hand, there is the reaction of fundamentalists who glorify and celebrate this early violence, making it an object of veneration, and therefore wanting to keep it alive in compulsive and ritualised repetition.

I think that between these two responses, there's a middle ground, namely to look this history straight in the eye but to keep it at bay at the same time, taking it for what it is: a bygone past that needs to be contextualised, subjected to a critical analysis and a critical reading.¹⁶ It appears that the texts of the Tradition lend themselves readily to such an exercise. Certainly, they serve as a tool for fundamentalist movements to legitimise violence. But we now see that this literature that sometimes 'poisons' our lives contains the 'antidote' itself! It suffices to turn the textual weapon against the fanatics and other charlatans and to show, with the same texts, that the utopia of a perfect, absolute Islam, supported by a supposedly infallible political institution, the caliphate, is pure imposture.

The religious-political movements have always confiscated the past, and falsified history: they freeze Tradition, mummify it to manipulate it at will, and thus retain control of the spirits. I have tried to snatch the same texts from these manipulators and to discover them for myself. I think we should all do that, everyone in his or her own way. This was not possible before, it was difficult to have access to the texts and they were scrupulously guarded. Now that is no longer the case. Frankly, we have no more excuses...

My readers often tell me that they are amazed at what they read in my books. They say to me, 'But that's not what we've been told!' And I always answer them, 'It's easy! Check out the sources for yourself! Don't be misled.' We must break with the intellectual laziness that prevents us from bending over the foundational texts of Islam. Each period in history must master its own tradition in order to reread and rewrite it.

¹⁶ The most important work area undoubtedly remains that of the Koran. It is no longer enough to provide a modern interpretation – which will ultimately be just one interpretation among many others. The Koran must be stripped of the myth that presents it as an uncreated and timeless divine word by revealing the slow – and often violent – process of its historical elaboration. The Koran we have in our hands today was laid down at least two centuries after the death of Muhammad. If we have no material trace of the original Koran, what guarantees us that the present Koran is the same as that which would have been revealed to Muhammad? But of course the subject deserves a more exhaustive exposition...

As we all know, the 16th century in Europe is still called the century of the Renaissance, but it is a century that was torn apart by the wars of religion. However, when we talk about the Renaissance, it's because in that century some people decided to read the books from Antiquity differently. Through this beneficial gesture, they changed the world!

Many of today's Muslim thinkers have embarked on these types of ventures – and they have often paid for them with their lives! They have discussed the nature of power within Islam, and in doing so they had the courage to go back to the sources, to demonstrate the artificial nature of politico-religious and legal dogmas that block any possibility of reform in the Muslim world. They have shown that these dogmas are the fruit of a historical construction and that they do not at all possess the supposed sanctity one shrouds them in to make them indisputable and untouchable.

One of the most important authors in this regard is Ali Abderraziq (1888-1966), an Egyptian theologian who laid the groundwork for a major turning point in Arab and Islamic thought in the twentieth century, with the publication, in 1925, of *al-Islam wa usul al-hukm* [Islam and the Foundations of Power].¹⁷ This sheikh of the Al-Azhar University shows irrefutably that the confusion between politics and religion in Islam is the product of history, and that the institution of the caliphate is not grounded in religious law, nor in reason. In his book he reveals the history of the caliphate, showing the mystifications that surrounded it in the Muslim imagination. He claims that this Islamic power institute was based solely on arms and violence. The author furthermore shows that the first message of Islam is purely spiritual – *din*, religion, and not *dawla*, state. Because of his critical and iconoclastic thinking, Ali Abderraziq was convicted of blasphemous heresy and expelled from the Al-Azhar University; in passing, his work was also burned.

The second major name that has given rise to a daring reflection on the relationship of Islam to political power is Sudanese thinker Mahmoud Mohamed Taha (1909-1985). In particular in his important work *al-Risala al-thania mina-l-Islam* [The Second Message of Islam], published in 1967, Taha showed that the Koran contains two messages.¹⁸ He effectively proves that the discriminatory and violent dimension of

¹⁷ The book was published in English as *Islam and the Foundations of Political Power*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1994 (translation Maryam Loutfi).

¹⁸ The English translation of this work bears the title *The Second Message of Islam*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1996 (translation Abdullahi Ahmed An Na'im).

certain Koranic dogmas dates back to the Medinan period of Muhammad's life, namely the period of the Hegira, the exile to Medina. Taha thinks that this period in Medina corresponds to a certain decadence in the Muslim community. He goes on to state that we should return to the Koranic message of the Meccan period – that is, before the Hegira – because during this period the authentic divine message was revealed in its spiritual meaning. That message was eventually suppressed by a violent historical Islam to which Muslims had been subject and to which they subjected others – since the seventh century. This thesis got Mahmoud Mohamed Taha in serious trouble. In 1976, the Al-Azhar Mosque demanded the death penalty.¹⁹ Taha was charged with apostasy and effectively sentenced to death: on January 18, 1985, he was hanged. The Muslim World League warmly congratulated president Numeiri on Taha's execution!

The same fate will befall a famous Egyptian intellectual, Faraj Fouda (1945-1992). Fouda was a free thinker and author whose books were considered blasphemous by the Al-Azhar Mosque.²⁰ Following the fatwa of this institution, two men belonging to the al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya (a kind of militia of the Muslim brothers) shot him in the street in front of his son. So it suffices to see the fate of Ali Abderraziq, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha and Faraj Fouda suffered – and to observe the threats and intimidations received by all thinkers who dared to put the political and legal prescriptions of Islam into historical perspective – to conclude that any critical reflection that deviates from dogmatic thinking has little chance of success in the contemporary Muslim world. At the same time, the courageous course of life of these three figures shows that intimidation, threat and violence have failed to overcome free thinking in the Islamic countries. (And of course they are not the only ones, we only mention them as telling examples...) Free thinking continues its course amid a troubled ocean. Previous generations of enlightened minds have shown the way to reappropriate the Muslim tradition with a critical eye.

It is the road to salvation, because this critical reappropriation of Tradition consists of a double gesture: one of demystification-demythification, but also one of total inscription of Islam in the course of history. For as a result of the ideological and political manipulation of past texts, Islam was cut off from its historical origins. This, in turn, has led to the actual

exclusion of the religion from the dynamics of history and the bogging down of Islam in tragic anachronism, as embodied by the jihadist movements.

To counter the anachronism and the eschatological (chilastic) vision carried by the fanatical movements, it was necessary to re-place Islam in a historical perspective while rendering Muhammad and his companions their (imperfect) humanity. In so doing, they are no longer those bodiless beings, those phantoms of the past haunting our present. Muslims are ruled by dead men, which largely explains the deadly face that Islam so often adopts.

Each period in history must appropriate its own tradition, not to sacralise it, but to treat it as a living being that is itself the fruit of a given historical era. This relativisation makes it possible to enter into a dialogue with the texts of the Tradition, rather than reciting them. This historical perspective, coupled with a critical reading of the sources, makes it possible to understand why Islam has entered modernity backwards, and to look for the original computational error. Today, the latter causes the software of this religion to crash, creating numerous bloody bugs in front of our horrified eyes!

¹⁹ See the April 16, 1976, issue of Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram*.

²⁰ Among his numerous publications, we can mention *al-Haqiqa al-gha'iba* [The Absent Truth] from 1984 and *Hiwar hawla al-'ilmaniyya* [Debate on Secularism] from 1987.

CRITICAL THINKING WITHIN ISLAM

VUB Crosstalks and Moussem set up a lecture series on critical thinking within Islam. In their ideas about Islamic civilisation both Muslim extremists and Islamophobes go back to an originally 'pure' Islam, which was supposedly born 1400 years ago, but in reality did not really exist. Islam was never one block, one movement. On the contrary, it has always been a very diverse culture, strengthened by acculturation and by coming in contact with the Greek, Persian, Indian, African culture etc. A history that is also full of dissidence, heresy and rebellion. These sects and alternative theological currents are at the root of a fascinating culture of debate. Philosophers from the golden age of Islam such as Al Farabi, Averroës, Avicenna, Abu Al Alaa Al Ma'ari Abu Bakr Al Razi, Omar Khayyam, Abu Hayyan Al Tawhidi... are founders of a culture based on reason and science. In today's complex world, attention to these forgotten thinkers is more than necessary.